DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 240 628 CS 504 451

AUTHOR Howell, William S.
TITLE Coping with Frontiers.
PUB DATE Apr 81
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Speech Association (Chicago, IL, April 9-11, 1981).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication (Thought Transfer); Communication Research; *Educational Change; Educational Trends; Futures (of Society); Higher Education; Intellectual History; Intercultural Communication; Interdisciplinary Approach; Organizational Communication; *Professional Development; *Professional Recognition; Professional Services; Scholarship; *Speech Communication

ABSTRACT

Over the past fifty years, the speech communication discipline has confronted more frontiers than most. Earlier frontiers involved a preoccupation with physiology and an application of electricity to speech communication in a myriad of ways. Another reliable source of frontiers and one that led to fragmentation or a speech department of unified diversities is the seeking of specializations within speech communication. Later frontiers revolved around a fascination with intercultural communication and the necessity to deal with communication across cultures. A more recent and more rapidly advancing frontier concerns organizational communication. Both of these frontiers--organizational communication and intercultural communication--are of equal importance. Both are joint ventures with other disciplines and as such they reflect the continuing frontier of working out satisfactory relationships with related fields of study. A divisive frontier that challenges the profession is one of interaction, of fitting metaphoric and experientially derived notions that are useful and operationally valid into a statistical world. (HOD)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

ED240628

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

# Coping with Frontiers

William S. Howell

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

William S. Howell

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS 504 451

# Coping With Frontiers

William S. Howell
University of Minnesota

We in speech communication are and always have been frontiers people. Thirty years ago--or perhaps as recently as ten--I would have said "frontiersmen". And no one would have noticed. Here is a minor frontier we are trying to cope with currently, the immensely heightened sensitivity to gender in communication. That I just now used "gender" instead of "sex" shows that I am more or less automatically trying to adjust to the times. Talking about "communication across sexes," or "sexual communication," or even the somewhat euphemistic phrase "influence of sexuality on communication" seems to make many people uptight.

Publishers caution authors to be ever vigilant about inadvertantly giving offense to female, homosexual, androgynous or male readers. This is serious business; in the minds of many it amounts to sexual harrassment. And here we have another confusing and evolving frontier. I say "evolving" for perceptions of sexual harrassment in the work place are different today than they were yesterday, and will be tomorrow. Perhaps the most insightful prediction of the future of that perplexing phenomenon is the generalization made by Michael Korda, "Sexual harassment," he said, "used to be considered a male perc."

But already, having just begun, I digress. I would suggest that over the past 50 years our discipline has confronted more

frontiers than most. Because we are an interdisciplinary discipline we have been feeling our way. Are we closer to the sciences or to the arts? Can we combine them, or are they intrinsically incompatible? As a field of study, what holds us together? What is the primary task that justifies our existence in academe and in the surrounding community? Can we use this central objective to convince public, school administrations and collegiate deans that we deserve support? How do we steal from other disciplines and make them feel good about it? When we venture into other territories, particularly old line departments, what are our scholarly responsibilities? Must we do basic research in psychology, social psychology, linguistics and claim for ourselves competence equal to doctoral level specialists in those and many other disciplines? Should we do our own thing with their subject matter or work toward joint ventures with scholars in other academic compartments? A continuing frontier, one at least as challenging now as it was a half century ago, is working out satisfactory relationships with related, and essential, fields of study.

I prefer tangible, pragmatic, contingent frontiers, like trying to convince others they need us. We could call this the frontier of gaining acceptance, and it is an ever present obstacle to our stability. Acceptance is the ultimate contingency; won today it evaporates tomorrow.

When I was a debate coach eons ago I had a powerful and charismatic debater who, as all debaters do, occasionally ran out of evidence. I knew this was the case when Jack would put his cards aside, approach the audience and ask them to join

him in addressing the issue using "Mainstreet Logic." Strangely, he was able to put abstract complications into simple familiar concrete realities so reasonably that these interludes of commonsense were the best persuading he did, for judges as well as for audience. His "Mainstreet Logic" won many debates.

A few months ago I heard a speech communication graduate student use Mainstreet Logic persuasively in answering the query of a professor of social work concerning the role of her major department. She very innocently asked, "Is interpersonal communication important in Social Work? Then, "Are problems of person to person communication easy to define and solve?" The Department of Speech Communication is the only academic agency that spends full time studying personal interaction. Since communication is both complicated and important, should not higher education provide opportunity for students to learn what there is to know about and practice techniques of person to person communication? Understanding of and skill in spoken interaction are important adjuncts to the practice of many professions and vocations. The Speech Communication Department exists to increase this supplementary competence.

The professor of Social Work looked thoughtful and perhaps grudgingly admitted "Makes sense." The graduate student assumed a couple of controversial argumentative positions in the above dialogue. She chose to argue in commonsense rather than theoretical terms (used Mainstreet Logic) and she assigned to speech communication an adjunct function rather than a primary and independent scholarly role. In my opinion she made good choices. I think our future as a discipline depends upon our ability to demonstrate practical benefits of having us around.

And here is another frontier--this requires that we accept as our primary task an adjunct function, helping persons in varied vocations and professions do their jobs better. It is difficult for many of us to swallow being categorized as "a service department." But recognition of our "services" integrates us not only with the academic environment but with the community. Outreach, a current buzz word on campuses these days, consists of providing consultation--trouble shooting services--to our constituents. Naturally I prefer to label this interpretation of Speech Communications' role "adjunct" rather than service. Either term is useful in answering an increasingly frequent survival-type question, What have you done for us lately?

When I was president of SCA I said something that caught Bill Work's fancy, or at least he repeated it on several occasions. As I remember, I said that when we assessed our field of study we tended to ask the wrong questions. We ask "Where are we?" and "Where are we going?" We should be asking, "Who needs us?" and "What are we doing for them?" Now I realize I was comparing two different central attitudes in speech communication, self-sufficiency or service.

Like most advanced studies we often tolerate unnecessary complexity. I'm not exactly touting Mainstreet Logic as a panacea, but the ability to simplify understandably is certainly characteristic of mature scholarship. However, simplification follows mastery of the intricate and difficult, it is not a substitute. A wise Professor of Psychiatry, John Brantner, expresses this in metaphor: "There is a difference between the

simplicity on the near side of the complexity and the simplicity on the far side."

Early Frontiers

Certain frontiers are memorable. We were for a time preoccupied with physiology and sought to advance our understanding of talking by investigating the mechanism that produced it. Gladys Borchers secured fresh, indeed almost warm, pig larynges from a Madison slaughter house, the better to teach how vocal folds function. There was spirited debate on whether this vital component should be labelled "vocal cords" or "vocal folds" and concerning the nature of their sound emitting vibration. To solve the mystery of the production of voiced sounds Bill Fletcher turned to high speed photography. In those days of slow film it was necessary to beam light of high intensity down the throats of his living subjects, preferably without broiling adjacent tissues. Bill took most of the heat out of his light by passing it through a cubic foot of water and ultimately accelerated his rates of exposure to 4000 pictures per second. Then we knew about vocal fold vibration. This was pure basic research. We knew it was because it didn't help us teach anyone to communicate more effectively.

In these early days many of us developed an almost indecent relationship with the electron. We applied electricity to speech communication in a myriad of ways, trying everything our minds could conceive except applying shocks to energize dull speakers. Possibly that was tried somewhere, but I don't recall its being reported in the journals.

The simplest catastrophy I can recall that involved use of electricity in the speech classroom was the brain child of one of our famous researchers and teachers, John V. Irwin. The attempt was to suggest corrective action to the student speaker while she/he was delivering a speech. On the speaker's stand but invisible to the audience was a panel with approximately ten bits of advice, each of which would light up when the appropriate button was pushed by the instructor seated in the rear row. Jack intended that the suggestion would enter the speaker's nervous system via peripheral vision, subconsciously, without disturbing the speaker's concentration upon content and audience. Theoretically, when "speak louder", "gesture more", "speak slower", or "smile" lit up the speaker would modify behavior in that direction without consciously considering the change. In practice, this didn't happen. Typically the speaker would stop, stare at the panel, and forget what came next. We assumed that students would get used to the device, and ultimately find it helpful. This didn't happen either. We tried varying the messages--noimprovement. Finally Jack tried an item on the panel that caused even the best speakers to disintegrate and ended the experiment. The message that caused paralysis in everyone when it lit up was "STOP BORING"!

I'm not sure whether Jack Irwin tempted me to spend too much time on electronics or I tempted him. We devised a gadget that made weak voices strong. With his usual ingenuity Jack christened it the "Increvox." We validated the device by selecting a dozen or so of the weakest voices among a thousand fundamentals of speech students, and assigning them practice

periods on the machine. All attained normal vocal volume in a few weeks. In a couple of instances we left the machine on too long and the formerly inaudible subject became obnoxiously loud.

The University of Minnesota patented our invention. A major manufacturer of hearing aids negotiated with us to miniaturize and market the Increvox. Then, the manufacturer received a huge order from the Department of Defense. No other bidders appeared, and the possible salvation for pathologically weak voices was lost to mankind forever.

My favorite application of electronics to speech communication emerged in the late 1950's and was a product of the ingenuity of Elwood A. Kretsinger, then at the University of Oregon. Professor Kretsinger noted that people who were less attentive to a speaker fidgeted more. Random body movements seemed to be inversely correlated with degree of attention to a stimulus. People completely engrossed in a speaker's message didn't wiggle much, if at all.

Kretsinger came up with a gadget for summating random movement in an audience that completely captivated my imagination. He submerged the audience in an invisible, tasteless, odorless magnetic field. The device registered any movement in the field, and the more movement there was, the higher readings it gave. Incidentally, this technique is now used in the most advanced burglar alarms.

Did it work in measuring attention to a speaker in an audience? In a way it did, but it had a weakness that I suspect prevented its adoption as an attention measuring machine. The individual auditor who went to sleep registered as paying

total attention.

But enough of gadgetry, I can't expect you to share my fascination in technology as it impacts upon oral communication.

Seeking the essence of any of our specializations in speech communication has been a reliable source of frontiers. Donald K. Smith and I had a compelling insight into the process of group work. Obviously, the secret of increasing productivity of groups was to--somehow--make them more rational. So in 1956 we published a book titled Discussion which almost entirely consisted of applied inductive and deductive logic. Unhappily, this scholarly effort entered the market at about the time Carl Rogers took over the group process. Sensitivity training claimed center stage. The major use of our Discussion book was by debate coaches, to teach their debaters how to use logic in argument.

A frontier we dealt with, which I disliked, was fragmentation. I appreciated the speech department of unified diversities. For many years of my lengthy stay at Minnesota speech included oral interp, theatre, pathology and audiology, public speaking, rhetoric, and all the modern spinoffs, such as group work and interpersonal communication. Frank Rarig was then insisting that oral interpretation was the center of our discipline. Howard Gilkinson was as interested in research in theatre and pathology as he was in research in public address. Frank Whiting was running social theatre, he said, and his students badly needed public speaking, persuasion and group work. And Bryng Bryngelson was into everything. Although he was head of

pathology and audiology, he taught a fantasically successful course titled "Personality Development Through Speech." As an innovator he was unequaled. His theory that a major cause of stuttering was forcing naturally left handed people to use the right hand led to the conclusion that stuttering could be relieved by systematically helping stutterers regain their natural left hand dominance. His patients played left handed ping pong, used left handed desk-chairs, wrote only left handed, etc. We still have a few of the Bryngelson left handed pencil sharpeners around Folwell Hall, a source of perplexity for this generation of faculty and students.

I'm pleased that the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association a couple of years ago recognized Bryng Bryngelson at their national convention as a man ahead of his time.

But I digress.

Late Frontiers

In 1969-70 I was an SCA vice-president and had inherited major responsibilty for planning the national 1970 convention. At the time I had been cruising around the world in projects of intercultural communication, so perhaps I can be excused for my conviction that communication across cultures should be our convention theme. But what I did about it was not excusable. I worked through the Kiwanis and Rotary clubs in Hongkong, and arranged for hotel rooms and space for the convention. I thought ~~was~~ we could schedule most convention sessions in the morning and leave afternoons free to become acquainted with

the many aspects of that fascinating Third Culture. The Hongkong Chamber of Commerce joined the Rotary and Kiwanis in assuring me that their hospitality in these matters would exceed our expectations. Transporation was, of course, a problem. The 747 Jumbo Jet wasn't yet in service but was scheduled to be soon so I reserved two, one to leave early and one late from California, and one to return early and one later from Hongkong. The travel cost LA-Hongkong was about what it cost to fly from East to West coast, USA.

What a magnificent moment when I told the Administrative Committee that I hoped we could have our 1970 SCA Convention in Hongkong! I remember that the Committee tried to be gentle with me in pointing out the absurdity of my proposal. Clearly, it was an idea whose time had not come. Since then ICA and SIETAR (The Society for International Education, Training and Research) have held conventions in other countries, the Global Village concept has prospered, and satellite communication brings us together at a geometrically increasing rate. But I remember that Administrative Committee with great affection. Although there was a little forehead tapping they made great concessions. I had my convention in a multi-cultural city, New Orleans, and the theme was the one I proposed, intercultural communication. But I still regret our missing the opportunity to be the first academic communication association to recognize the intercultural realities of our profession by holding our 1970 convention in Hongkong.

We turned away from that frontier, but a less dramatic derivative frontier is with us. This is the necessity to deal

with communication across cultures more competently than we do. Although at first introducing intercultural communication seems a minor change--add a course or two and away we go. What is disturbing is that every course we teach is mono-cultural. And to claim to be multi-cultural every topic we deal with must be given an intercultural dimension. Such revision of the curriculum is impossible with current personnel. Probably 95% of the persons teaching speech communication have negligible knowledge of its cross-cultural complexities. So, telling teachers to make their courses intercultural isn't quite going to achieve the millenium.

So, progress on the conversion to multi-culturality will be tedious and slow. Fortunately the ideal of making education multi-cultural is getting a lot of lip service. Also, an increasing number of people with experience in other cultures are coming back to school. They demand intercultural communication education in their curricula, for they know that their difficulties away from home come preponderantly from their inability to understand and communicate with the host culture.

A frontier advancing upon us far more rapidly than the intercultural communication problem concerns primarily another somewhat new spinoff in our curriculum, organizational communication. Across America, schools of business are in a bad way. Some years ago the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration discovered that the bottom third of their MBA's were more successful in their business careers than the top third. Understandably, the lack of correlation between

success in school and achievement after graduation caused concern. Now higher education in business is being blasted right and left for turning out number crunchers who can't handle human relationships.

How does this concern us? David Lilly, head of the University of Minnesota College of Business Administration, answers this question. In March 1981 he said "Communication is all important if you are going to be a working member of society. If you have the technical ability and you're unable to communicate, it's of no use."

Business needs us, on campus and off. Not only the organizational specialization but many of our interpersonal and group methods courses help people work together effectively. It took a long time but finally the educators in business are realizing that management is not an exact science. Rather, it is a messy art.

Immediately there are opportunities. At Minnesota our business school is requiring an extra speech course of pre-business students and/an additional more advanced course of senior majors. This dumps a thousand or more extra students per year in our lap, which is also a problem. But it also makes it necessary to work out a long range joint venture. Which takes me back to early in this paper when I discussed our "adjunct role."

In the future speech communication majors--Bachelors, Masters and Ph.D.'s--will expect to have careers in something other than speech communication. They will plan their education pointing toward the position they hope to fill, in public health, business, government, whatever. Their vocational preparation

will be in speech communication and in related fields. Because the importance of their communication competence is being recognized increasingly, they will enjoy a competitive advantage over other job seekers whose qualifications are purely technical.

Last week one of my recent Ph.D.'s dropped in to announce that she had been appointed an assistant professor of management in a highly respected school of business. I told her she was the point in our opening up a new frontier. She and, I hope, a multitude of others, will help schools of business incorporate principles of humane interaction in their programs. We can help business education become people conscious and communication competent. We are an essential adjunct to business education.

I consider progress on these two frontiers, organizational communication and intercultural communication, to be of equal importance. Both are intrinsically joint ventures with other disciplines. Both will test our ability to work with people who are different than we are. We are busily crossing boundaries that a few years ago were uncrossable. Perhaps the future of the business we are in requires that we cooperate in the creation of Third Cultures.

A Divisive Frontier: Implications of Interaction

Ed Stewart, one of the thoughtful persons currently wrestling with problems of developing intercultural communication theory, has his doctorate in psychology. Recently he has become intrigued with speech communication because, as he told me, "You study the arrow that connects S and R. Other disciplines center their attention on stimulus or response."

I hope Ed is right. I would like to believe that we are focussing on what happens between people, on the process we glibly label "interaction" or "transaction." But what I read in journals and books and hear at conventions suggests that we are examining and correlating "S" and "R" and not really doing much about that mysterious arrow.

If this is true, why? Perhaps because the ingredients of stimulus and response can be defined and quantified more readily than can the variables that shape moment to moment interaction. A lot of important stuff in processes of interaction cannot be pinned down specifically; at least, not with currently-available tools and techniques. To advance understanding of interaction processes we resort to examples and metaphor, evidence that many folks in speech communication find unacceptable.

That there is more to communication than the definable was impressed upon me in Japan. The occasion was an international conference on the study of intercultural communication. Half the participants were Japanese, half Americans. We had finally agreed upon the purpose of studying and teaching intercultural

communication: "To help people communicate across cultural boundaries with socio-linguistic relevance." Certainly this was a fine-sounding though somewhat abstract objective. Immediately an American said, "Fine. Now, let's define it." Almost in unison, the Japanese replied, "Don't define it. You'll kill it!"

When you define something you limit the range of possible interpretations and stifle creativity. Leaving a concept a bit vague around the edges may well contribute to its usefulness. The conflicting needs to define or to resist definition are based on the hope for predictability or the desire for flexibility. The Japanese are happy to sacrifice a great deal of predictability in order to maximize freedom to cope with the unexpected. We in the West have bet our stack of blue chips on the chief constituents of predictability, defining and quantifying. We are literal, they are metaphoric. Consequently, metaphoric contributions to communication theory are little respected and remain undeveloped in America.

Ralph Nichols, a former SCA President, advised his public speaking students, "Don't explain. Illustrate!" Explanation, he said, is dull and laborious. Illustrations bring human events to life and make them real. Ralph was really telling his students that the good speaker is metaphoric as well as literal.

Our interaction frontier challenges us to fit metaphoric and experientially derived notions which are useful, that is, operationally valid, into a statistical world. The behavioral

sciences can't handle such materials, they at best can only provide literal interpretations. As a result most of us define and quantify inappropriately. Behavioral science methods have booby-trapped us into trying to explain metaphor, a debilitating exercise in futility. We must address considerations of quality in human interaction and balance this emphasis with quantification. Then perhaps we can increase our understanding of the intriguing arrow that connects S and R.